

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Founded by JOSEPH PULITZER

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THE POST-DISPATCH PLATFORM

I KNOW THAT MY ATTIREMENT WILL MAKE NO DIFFERENCE IN ITS CARDINAL PRINCIPLES, THAT IT WILL ALWAYS FIGHT FOR PROGRESS AND REFORM, NEVER TOLERATE INJUSTICE OR CORRUPTION, ALWAYS FIGHT DEMAGOGUES OF ALL PARTIES, NEVER BELONG TO ANY PARTY, ALWAYS CHOOSE FAVORED CLASSES AND PUBLIC FUNDERS, NEVER LACK SYMPATHY WITH THE POOR, ALWAYS REMAIN DEVOTED TO THE PUBLIC WELFARE, NEVER BE SATISFIED WITH MERELY PAINFUL NEWS, ALWAYS BE DRACONICALLY INDEPENDENT, NEVER BE AFRAID TO ATTACK WRONG, WHETHER BY PREDATORY PLUTOCRACY OR PREDATORY POVERTY.

JOSEPH PULITZER

April 20, 1902

Sunday, April 20, 1961

President Kennedy's analysis of the problems of a free press in the cold war was clear, and so was his meaning. He suggested in his talk before the Bureau of Advertising of the American Newspaper Publishers Association that the press submit itself to a system of voluntary censorship under government direction, as has been customary during shooting wars. Such a system would make the press an unofficial arm of the government, something as it is an official arm in totalitarian countries.

This, we believe, would undermine the essential mission of the press, which is to inform, interpret and criticize. Its right to do this is protected by the Constitution, and by and large it has exercised this right in a responsible manner. Should Mr. Kennedy's views prevail there would inevitably be sharp changes in the nature of our free society.

The President's position is not frivolous. The dilemma is real. It is the dilemma, as he put it, of "a free and open society in a cold and secret war." In his mind obviously was the reporting by enterprising newspapers of as many facts as could be gathered about the ill-fated Cuban invasion, including the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency. Speaking of the "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" with which the free world is struggling, he said:

"Its preparations are concealed, not published. Its initiatives are veiled, not heralded. Its dissidents are silenced, not honored. No expenditure is questioned, no rumor is printed, no secret is revealed. It conducts the cold war, in short, with a wartime discipline. No democracy would ever hope or wish to match. Nevertheless, every democracy recognizes the necessary restraints of national security—and the question remains whether those restraints need to be more strictly observed if we are to oppose this kind of attack as well as outright invasion."

Perhaps Mr. Kennedy is correct in saying that more restraint is needed. But if it is, it should be exercised by individual editors and publishers and not in conformity with a code that would of necessity be administered from a central source.

There is no lack of patriotism among editors, but there is, as there should be, a wide variety of opinion. In the case of the Cuban affair, for example, the newspapers of Florida agreed among themselves to say nothing about the training of refugees for the invasion. The New York Times, on the other hand, sent Latin American experts to Miami to obtain and publish as much information as they could obtain from refugee leaders.

Obviously the editors of the New York and Florida papers differed in their judgments. It was their right. But it seems also obvious that if all of the newspapers had agreed to conform to a code in co-operation with a government agency, the American people would be less able to evaluate the Cuban

There is no doubt that the existence of an aggressive and inquiring press is and will be an inhibiting factor in the sort of operation the CIA attempted in Cuba. But it would be better to conclude that maneuvers of this sort should not be undertaken by an open society than that our society should become less open. Perhaps a choice need not be made. That much, however, is quite clear: a free, aggressive, inquiring and above all pluralistic press is indispensable to a free society. In full knowledge that some newspapers may abuse their trust, the free society must rely upon the discretion and sense of responsibility of individual editors and publishers instead of trying to impose upon them all a monolithic uniformity like that of the totalitarian press.

Mr. Kennedy himself gave a partial answer to his own argument for considering press restraints. He said: "Even today, there is little value in opposing the threat of a closed society by imitating its arbitrary restrictions. Even today, there is little value in insuring the survival of our nation if our traditions do not survive with it."

With that we fully agree.